

The Messianic Personality II:

Solomon Molks.

In the summer of 1492 the Jews of Spain were expelled from that country. Five years later, most of those who had left Spain and found a precarious shelter in neighboring Portugal, were forcibly converted. None of the previous disasters which had befallen the Jewish people in the course of the middle Ages had left much of a mark in Jewish literature, even the literary response to the massacres of Jewish communities along the Rhine river during the Crusades was as a passing ripple in comparison to the Expulsion of Spain, which was recorded in dozens of contemporary works in terms which were meant to harrow the soul. One statement is typical

Why was the Exile of Sefarad [Spain] destroyed which contained close to 300,000 families... We were despised and despoiled. Some of us were killed by the sword, others were drowned in the sea. Still others died

of hunger, thirst and exposure. Men of rank and lineage fell from their positions. The wealthy and honored begged for bread with none to give it to them.

Why was this so? The answer involves us in attempting to understand both the ~~importance~~^{gravity} of the crisis of Expulsion and its ramifications, both material and spiritual. The Expulsion^{from Spain} was not the first. It was rather the capstone of a series of Expulsions of the Jews starting in England in 1290. Jews were expelled from France in 1306 and ~~to~~ later, finally, in 1394. Expulsions had also taken place in large portions of Germany as well. Western Europe in the later middle ages was progressively ridding itself of its Jewish population. Now had come the turn of the Jewry of Spain and Portugal, involving the richest, most populous and most intellectually pre-eminent among medieval Jewry. If it could happen to the Jews of Spain? Which Jewry

was safe. If this process continued, would the Jewish people be able to survive?

At that point, many Jews, if only for an instant, succumbed to despair. Isaac Abarbanel, the leader of the Jewish Exiles from Spain, expressed this despair in a commentary he wrote on the Passover Haggada in 1497. In commenting on the verse in the Hallel *לֹא כֻלָּם יִשְׁכָּחוּ* *lo kulam yishkachu* — "And I said in my heart all men are false" (Ps 116, 11).

I will relate how I used to say in those days [of the Expulsion] "all men are false - that is, all the prophets who prophesied my redemption and salvation are false. Moses was false in his witness, Isaiah was false in his comforts, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were false in their prophecies."

This little reaction to the trauma of Expulsion did not last however. It was replaced, as in other crises in Jewish

history, with a re-emphasis on the messianic belief, expression of a deep inner conviction that the outer verdict of history was not the last word and that the Expulsion was part and parcel of the sufferings and woes which were to precede messiah's coming and which were known as "birthpangs of the messiah." God's promise to redeem the Jews was indeed going to be fulfilled - and soon.

Isaac Abarbanel predicted that messiah would come in the year 1503. Another contemporary of the Expulsion, Abraham Halevi predicted he would come in 1530 - still within the lifetime of many of those who had been expelled from Spain in 1492.

There were many people in that generation who were concerned with the coming of the messiah. Most of them, however,

were content to expect the messiah's coming without doing anything special about it save calling upon Jews to repent. Today, however, we will be speaking of a couple of men who do not fit in this pattern. These are men, like the men I described to you last week, who believed that messiah would be coming soon and that they were destined to play an active role in the messianic drama that was about to unfold.

In 1524 a mysterious emissary arrived in Venice from the Middle East. He called himself David Reubeni and claimed to be an ambassador of the Jewish kingdom of Habor, seeking an alliance with the Christian states of Western Europe against the Turks, who at that point were considered a grave threat to Christendom and especially to Italy. Now today, if someone

like that showed up, claiming to be the emissary of a country no one had ever heard of, he might find his ~~reception~~^{listeners} to be rather sheptical. It was different in the early 16th century, however. The world was still full of unexplored areas. The New world had been discovered by Columbus but a few decades previously and no one could deny the possibility that such a kingdom, populated by the descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel could exist.

At any rate, Reuben was received by the Pope, who sent him on to the King of Portugal, since Portugal's explorers had penetrated that part of the world Reuben claimed to hail from. In Portugal, Reuben conducted negotiations for ~~an~~^{military} alliance and for technical assistance between Portugal and his kingdom.

Now let's turn to Portugal where, as we remember, a mere 27 years previously tens of thousands of Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity. Some had managed to escape to places where they could once more practice their Judaism, ~~but~~ but most had stayed.

The question of the actual belief of these New Christians - as they were politely called (their enemies called them *Marranos-pigs*) is a matter of scholarly debate. It seems clear, however, that at this point, with no Inquisition set up in Portugal as there was in Spain, that a sizeable amount of clandestine Jewish activity was going on and that, within the limits of common prudence, a good deal of Jewish knowledge could be acquired and a modified Jewish ritual could be observed.

All that couldn't, however, remove the psychological

strain which must have been present in the minds of these people leading double lives - Christians in public and Jewish in private. This strain resulted in the New Christians placing a great deal of emphasis on the messiah. The messiah would be the ultimate validation of their struggles. The messianic hope enabled them to exist in the unredemmed present and to persist in their Jewish consciousness and activities.

Place David Reubeni, ambassador from a Jewish kingdom, among the Portuguese New Christians and you will get a phenomenal reaction. Wherever Reubeni went in Portugal, he recorded in his diary which has come down to us, he was followed by New Christians who kissed his hand, showered him with gifts and acted as though he were the herald of their redemption. Reubeni stated that he tried

to discourage such devotion, which could well disrupt his main, diplomatic mission in Portugal. In other parts of his diary, though, ~~we read that he did record~~ ^{he did} at times encourage the New Christians to remain steadfast in their Jewish faith, announcing to them the imminence of their redemption and proclaiming that they would live to see a rebuilt Jerusalem.

Of all the people Reuben met and influenced in Portugal, the most famous was a young lawyer named Diogo Pires who was to turn into one of the most important messianic figures of the post-Expulsion era under the name he was to adopt - Solomon Molcho.

Pires' meeting with Reuben was the decisive event in his life. Reuben's effect was drastic. Pires began having dreams and visions in which he was commanded to ^{undergo} circumcision.

~~himself~~ which was the point of no return for a Judaising ~~New Christian~~ ^{Converse}. He begged Reuben to circumcise him but Reuben refused. Pires thereupon went home and performed the operation on himself. He then went into hiding and fled the country. As for Reuben, though he protested before the King that he had had no part in Pires' actions, it was of no avail. The disaster he had foreseen had come to pass. His negotiations with the Portuguese were broken off and shortly afterwards he was invited to leave the country.

Pires' who, as I said before, changed his name to Solomon Molhu, fled to the East, to ~~the~~ Turkey where he was able to return to Judaism without fear. He was certain, even then, that his journey was undertaken by divine command. He settled in Salomha, the

Jewish metropolis of the Ottoman Empire, where he studied Kabbala. He ^{quickly} became famous as a Kabbalist and as a preacher. A volume of his sermons was published in Salonika in 1529. He ~~could~~ ^{had} carved out a niche for himself in the Ottoman Empire and he could have remained there living comfortably and peacefully as did so many other former Conversos who returned to Tudarsin.

He chose otherwise, however. He felt that the messianic drama was to be played out in Christendom, and so perhaps seeing signs of the coming Redemption in the sack of Rome by the French in 1527, Molcho ~~so~~ went to Italy, landing in the port of Ancona.

Immediately he began preaching his messianic message in public. The Jewish communal leadership, fearing perhaps that Molcho would

focus undue attention on the presence of former
New Christians living as Jews in Italy (which
was a capital offense in church law)
denounced him to the authorities and he got
out of town quickly.

He headed, alone this time, to the
capital of Christendom the city of Rome.
Rome was the arch-symbol of the oppressors
of Israel. Romans destroyed the Temple. The
Jews were oppressed by the Christian Church
the head of which, the Pope, lived in
Rome. And, finally, Jewish legend had
connected the messiah himself to Rome.

[Messiah as Leper at Gates of Rome]

[Nahmanides - Messiah - Pope - Abulafia]

Molke wrote an account of his journey
to Rome. According to it, he arrived at
the city in the afternoon and stopped

in a field outside the city to pray *Mincha*.

While he was praying, he heard a heavenly voice declare that Rome was soon to be destroyed in the ^{coming} messianic cataclysm.

He disguised himself as a beggar and began a thirty-day vigil among the poor and diseased on the bridge over the Tiber river close to the Palace of the Pope. There he remained in his own mind both the Rabbini image of the messiah at the gates of Rome and the Biblical image of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53.

Once he had finished his mystical vigil, he went to the Jewish community where once again, as in Ancona, he was denounced to the authorities as dangerous. But he was saved this time by the intervention of none other than Pope

Clement VII who gave him a letter of protection which allowed him, despite his baptism to live openly as a Jew. In Rome he kept up his preaching among the Jews and became a regular member of the Papal court where several of his prophecies which came true, notably a flood in Rome and an earthquake in Portugal, ~~came true~~ ^{gave him} a reputation as a prophet in a city in which, as one contemporary observer put it - ~~the~~ no one would buy a stool of wood without first consulting astrologers and prophets.

Molkho, despite his position, had gained many enemies, both among the Jews and in the Papal court where many of the Cardinals opposed him as a New Christian who had Judaized in the most

public manner possible. Molke was hauled before the Inquisition to answer charges of Judaising. For the moment the Pope's letter of protection saved him, but his enemies weren't finished with him. One of them obtained a copy of one of Molke's sermons which had certain anti-Christian elements. This was translated into Latin and circulated. This turn of events caused Molke, in danger of his life to leave Rome on his final mission - a confrontation with the Holy Roman Emperor ~~Henry~~ Charles V at the Diet of Regensburg. At this point, in the Italian city of Ferrara, Molke wrote a poem which has been preserved in which he declared himself to be

on the way to fulfill God's mission.
May he find me worthy to see the
end of my mission.

Molkho was awaiting:

the time when God promised me that he would work wonders with me according to his will... from Him will my help come to complete all that I have to accomplish

On Molkho's journey to Regensburg, some accounts say that he was accompanied by David Reubeni, who had reappeared in Italy while others ~~say~~ speak only of Molkho. What did Molkho hope to accomplish in his confrontation with the Emperor. Regarding this question two schools of thought have arisen. A contemporary Hebrew chronicler, Joseph ha-Kohen inferred that he meant to "discuss religion" with the Emperor and even convert him to Judaism — a ~~plan~~^{confrontation} reminiscent of what Nahmanides had predicted for the messiah and the Pope. Another account

is that of the chief of the Jewish communities of the Holy Roman Empire - Joelmann of Rosheim who wrote that Molke desired to convince the Emperor to raise a Jewish army from his dominions which would aid him in his war against the Turks, a plan reminiscent of Reubens ideas of a military alliance between the Jews and the Christians against the Turks

Whatever his ostensible reason for meeting with the Emperor, it is clear that he was doing so not as an individual Jew - but as the representative of the Jewish people - the messiah son of Joseph, who, according to legend is to appear before messiah b. David and die in the wars against the nations of the world. In his writings, Molke was

quite specific about the mission of messiah
b. Joseph. He was to go to a place he
referred to a Tennen, which he located in
within the boundaries of the Holy Roman
Empire — where all the nations will be
assembled — as they indeed were for the
Diet or assembly of the Empire — and subjugate
the nations. Molko's mission in Italy, from
his vigil among the beggars of Rome to his
journey to Regensburg can only be understood
in terms of a messianic imperative.

In his works, Molko gives two dates
for the "End" — 5293 (1532/3) was ~~to~~^{to} be the
"end of the Exile" and 5300 (1539/40).

It is possible to assume that the former
date was to mark the appearance of
messiah son of Joseph while the latter
would be the final denouement. In any

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event, Molcho journeyed to confront the Emperor in the late summer or early fall of 1532 around the beginning of the Jewish year 5293 - the year he had stated was to mark the "end of the Exile".

We do not know whether Molcho ever got to see the Emperor. We do know that Molcho was arrested and carried to Mantua in Italy where he was tried by the Inquisition and was burnt at the stake in November, 1532.

He wasn't allowed to die in the popular imagination, though. A belief arose that Solomon Molcho did not die, that he remained alive and escaped to an unknown destination. Joseph Ha-Kohen recorded this legend and wistfully concluded

God only knows. If only I were able to report whether or not these rumors are true.

As for David Reubeni, he died in the dungeons of the Inquisition in the Spanish city of Badajoz in the year 1538.

Once again ^{having told the story} we ~~have been~~ ^{are} confronted with the problem of understanding Molkho and Reubeni and the other messianic personalities we have dealt with in the course of these two weeks. What caused them to go against the grain of their society - to attempt to take action on a political plane in order to bring about the messianic coming.

Reubeni's plan is a bit simpler to comprehend. ~~He~~ What he was after was to instigate a war between Western Christendom and the Turks - the two superpowers of their time. Many Jews at that time, among them Isaac Abarbanel felt that a war

between the superpowers was to mark the beginning of the messianic drama. Rubeni wished to bring about war between Christians and Turks. That much is clear. He was engaged in starting the ball rolling. Once the process had begun, all else would fall into place.

Understanding Molkho is a bit more difficult. In one version, he seems to have wished to make the same sort of proposal for a military alliance Rubeni did — and we can understand it as such. As for the other version of the story — where he was to attempt to convert the Emperor to Judaism — we may, with some justification feel that he had no set plan. His task was to be there and create a confrontation which would force God to intervene in a miraculous way to start the ^{messianic} drama. Molkho's arrest,

imprisonment and death could only confirm him in his certainty that he was messiah son of Joseph.

One final word. The messianic personality is a difficult concept for us to fathom. On the one hand ~~most of us~~ ^{the} issue of the messianic coming is not in our consciousness most of the time and when it is it is we tend not to think of people who ~~actually~~ go out and attempt to bring the messiah through their own actions. But, in order to understand the psychology of the Jewish people in Exile, it is of the greatest importance for us to understand not only the great Talmudists, Philosophers and Commentators on the Bible - but also the messianic idea of Judaism and, in particular, the driving force behind the messianic personality.